

The rising trend of minority incarceration rates

[Law](#), [Crime](#)



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Introduction

The United States can contribute their modern-day prison system to their ancestors. It started with the English philanthropists and their philosophies of solitary confinement as a form of corrective punishment. Not a relatively new idea but it was a step in a new direction away from the brutal punishment of times past. It wasn't until the 18th century till every country in the young United States had a jail. These jails had multiple functions, which included a place to hold prisoners of war, debtors, political prisoners, slaves and those who are awaiting trial for a crime they had been accused of committing. Of those committed of a crime, it normally was followed with a short sentence. At the time a few months was the typical long sentence with most offenses having a punishment of a couple days.

History of Prison System

From the beginning of Americans incarceration with a most counties having a single or a few jail cells to the mega prisons in America today it has been a dramatic change. In 1821 we saw our first jump in size with Eastern State

Penitentiary. It was unlike anything in America at its time. It was also the location for the first use of solitary confinement in the United States. (Temin, P. (2018). By the 1870's American prisons became separated by gender for the first time. From this point forward there were no more dramatic changes to the structure of the prison system other than the population. Come the 1970's we would see a shift in the population based on ethnicity.

War on Drugs and Mass Incarceration

In the summer of 1971, President Nixon declared the “ War on Drugs”. This opened the flood gates for federal drug control agencies along with the creation of laws such as; mandatory sentencing and no-knock warrants. This campaign with Nixon at the forefront was controversial and ruthless. One of Nixon's top aides would admit that it was against two enemies; hippies and blacks. You can't come out to the American people that you are going to be attacking these two groups. Instead you have to mask your main intent by attacking a correlation. In this case it was Leftist Hippies with Marijuana and African Americans with Heroin. By giving the American people this false impression that you are cleaning up the streets from the dangerous drugs it made it easier for them to turn a blind eye to the results.

When War on drugs.... This war on drugs is the largest single contributing factor to the dramatic rise of mass incarceration in the American Prison system.

It could be thought that since African Americans were being arrested at a much higher rate compared to the other ethnic groups that they were doing drugs at a vastly higher rate. The future survey of high school seniors

unwraps this hypothesis. In the Growth of Incarceration in the United States they dive into this self-report survey. According to the survey drug use among blacks is consistently lower when compared to white self-reported drug use. This trend is consistent when compared to adult drug use at the national level. On the other side when looking at distribution of drugs, although limited, the data again shows that poor whites are more likely to deal in the distribution of illegal drugs than a poor black youth. Contrary to popular belief the relationship between an increase in arrest rates and the actual amount of drug use African Americans are involved in compared to other ethnic groups does not have a correlation to back this belief. (Travis, J., & Western, B)

When looking at how the American Prison system has drastically changed over the years it is impossible to ignore the fact of mass incarceration. In Peter Temin's 2018 journal of The Political Economy of Mass Incarceration and Crime: An analytic model he provides that over a 55-year period from 1925-1980 the rates of incarcerations were about 100 people per 100,000 residents. Over the next 30 years we saw a slow rise in this incarceration rate till the twenty-first century. In 2009, the incarceration rates spiked to 700 people per 100,000 residents. That thrust the United States to lead the world in incarceration rates for developed countries. The United States was even ahead of Russia, a country known for their harsh laws and large prison systems. These are staggering statistics when looking at it from a distance. When you look at it with a microscope you see even more staggering findings.

According to the Color of Justice, in 2014 of the 6.8 million people incarcerated in the United States 2.3 million were African American or 34% of the total prison population. They continue that in 2015 African Americans and Latinos combined to make up approximately 56% of the national prison population (Walker, Spohn and Delone, 2018). That means that over half of prisoners are derived from two separate minority groups. In King and Page's Article they quote Michelle Alexander when she is talking about mass incarcerations and that it was a shift from the incarceration of an individual offender to the systematic imprisonment of whole groups of a certain population or demographic. In the same article it is stated that some sociologists have elaborated that prison is a stage of life for African Americans men in America.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be seen that the American prison system has changed multiple times in a variety of ways since its foundation in the early 1700's. The majority of changes came about to better handle the population and changing times. Along with these changes came new laws that led to a rise in incarceration rates due to drug-related offenses. This led to a simultaneous increase in the incarceration rate of African Americans. This relationship was contrary to popular hypotheses of the time not related. Instead it is due to the unjust prejudice of law and a few people of power at the time and the targeting of police.

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